

IS THERE A CHRISTIAN LAVER?

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"Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13:13-17).

Should it be necessary for Brethren, who hold that the Bible says what it means and means what it says, to offer any explanation as to why this passage should set forth a practice to be obeyed? If one takes the contrary view, it becomes necessary to set forth his reason as to why one should *not* obey it literally. After all, the Bible stands!

Since we are considering the passage above quoted, it will be enlightening to say that among believers, three viewpoints have been held.

Humility

The first viewpoint concerning the washing of the disciples' feet holds that our Lord used this extraordinary manner to teach a lesson in *humility*. As a sure proof of this viewpoint we are reminded of the fact that the disciples had a quarrel in which they disputed as to who should be greatest. This at first appears to seem reasonable. However, one clearly recorded fact shatters this theory completely.

From Luke 22:14 to 17 we learn that the dispute did *not* take place until after the Lord's act of washing the disciples' feet had taken place. This argument, therefore, has no basis.

That there is a teaching in these verses in favor of humility certainly no one would dare question. But any humility found in this passage is a by-product and is not the primary interpretation for the passage.

Old-time Custom

The second viewpoint is that Jesus

washed the feet of the disciples as an old-time custom. In defense of this position, it is pointed out that such a custom prevailed in the oriental lands among the sandal-wearing peoples. So, it is glibly stated that Christ was merely taking the part of the host in performing this act. This contention fails to explain the passage for three reasons:

(1) This particular act of washing was at the table instead of at the door. Who could imagine a host who would forget this important custom (if a custom) until the evening meal was in progress?

(2) Again, in the oriental house, the host did not wash the feet of the visitors, but instead, he merely provided the water for them to do their own washing.

(3) Finally, it is revealed not to be an old-time custom, for our Lord stated plainly: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter" (John 13:7).

If it had been an old-time custom they would have understood its meaning clearly. Thus the ignorance of these Jewish disciples concerning the act, and the promise of future enlightenment, indicate that our Lord had something of an extraordinary meaning to reveal.

A Practice

The third viewpoint concerning the passage is that our Lord, on the eve of His departure from this life of the flesh, instituted a practice filled with spiritual truth, which practice is to be perpetuated.

The Water Symbol. In the Bible, water is a symbol of spiritual cleansing. We find it so in the ceremonial observances of the Old Testament. The accounts of the consecration of the priesthood in Israel indicate this (Lev. 8:6). In the New Testament we

discover the same concerning baptism in water. Water cannot wash away sin, but believers are nevertheless commanded to be baptized in water (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38), not for "the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God" (I Pet. 3:21).

Cleansing of Believers. When a sinner comes in genuine and simple faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, receiving Him as his personal Saviour, trusting completely in the Christ of the Bible and His merit alone for salvation, God justifies that sinner and accounts him righteous. He is therefore born again, or "born from above," cleansed by the blood of Christ, and regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Upon the confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is commanded to be baptized. This baptism in water symbolizes cleansing from all the sin of the past. It also symbolizes the death and burial of the "old man" (the old life of sin now reckoned dead) and the resurrection of the "new man" (the new life of righteousness in Christ).

But after this has taken place, the justified, regenerated believer will discover that he still commits sins. He should not try to hide such, nor call them by some other name, but immediately confess to the Lord. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:8-9).

As baptism symbolizes that cleansing which takes place in a sinner upon his entrance into the Christian life, so the act pictured in John 13:1-17, where Jesus washed the disciples' feet, symbolizes the cleansing of the believer after he has been saved.

This was made especially plain in John 13:10, "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet." Discussing these words of Jesus, Jamieson, Faussett, & Brown in their commentary say: "Of the two cleansings, the one [baptism] points to that which takes place at the commencement of the Christian life, embracing complete absolution from sin as a guilty state . . . This cleansing is effective once and for all and is never repeated. The other cleansing, described as that of 'the feet' is such as one walking from the bath quite cleansed, still needs, in consequence of his contact with the earth."

Moffat translates this into modern speech thus: "He that is bathed only needs to have his feet washed." In other words, believers are not baptized repeatedly in their lives to indicate cleansing from sins. Instead, the washing revealed in John 13 indicates the cleansing from the sins of the believer's daily walk as the first bath (baptism) indicated cleansing from original sin.

Concerning this same passage, Dr. Scofield, the editor of the Scofield Reference Bible, remarks: "The underlying imagery is of an oriental returning from the public baths to his house. His feet would contact defilement and require cleansing, but not his body. So the believer is cleansed as before the law 'once for all' (Heb. 10:1-12), but needs ever to bring his daily sins to the Father in confession, that he may abide in unbroken fellowship with the Father and with the Son (I John 1:1-10). The blood of Christ answers forever to all the law could say as to the believer's *guilt*, but he needs constant cleansing from the *defilement* of sin. Typically, the order of approach to the presence of God was first, the brazen altar of sacrifice, and then the laver of cleansing. Christ cannot have communion with a defiled saint but he can and will cleanse him." It is therefore evident that our Lord's act of washing the disciples' feet is commonly believed to give us a great spiritual truth concerning the cleansing of believers from sins.

The Old Testament Priesthood

As we look at the Old Testament

priesthood, we should remember that we today as believers are said to be priests—a royal priesthood (I Pet. 2:9). In the Old Testament, men were washed, even their entire bodies, in water, at their entrance into the priesthood. Likewise, when believers enter the Christian life, they are commanded to be baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). When the Old Testament priests entered the Tabernacle of the congregation for service, they were commanded to wash their hands and feet at the laver. Failure to do so placed them under the penalty of death (Exod. 30:17-21). The laver was made from the brass mirrors of the women (Exod. 38:8) and to look into it was to see oneself. The first washing of the priest, and the second washing, at the laver, show concretely God's plan for cleansing. The first washing of the priests in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament remind us of the once-and-for-all cleansing in salvation. The washing of the priests at the laver and the washing of the feet according to John 13, point to the daily cleansing of the believer from his sins after he is saved.

The Laver in the New Testament

But this is not the last place in the Bible where we read of a laver. The Bible tells us that Christ gave himself for the church "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26). The American Standard Version gives us the possibility of this being rendered, "the laver of water with the Word." Here we discover that the laver is connected with the sanctification of believers. And certainly, in God's work of sanctification, He must make provision for cleansing.

This is a lesson always to be remembered. It must be impressed, emphasized, and re-emphasized. It therefore must be perpetuated.

The Plain Command

That this act, revealing the need and provision of continuous cleansing, is to be perpetuated is made clear four times in the verses which immediately follow:

1. "If I then, your Lord and Mas-

ter, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Ought to do what? Be humble? It does not so state. "Ye ought to wash one another's feet." This must mean exactly what it says!

2. Again, that this act is to be perpetuated is indicated when our Lord states: "I have given you an example [meaning exhibition, sample, pattern, or specimen], that ye should do as I have done to you." Should do what? "As I have done to you," is the answer. What had He done? This requires no answer. It is evident.

3. Still again, it is revealed that this act is to be perpetuated for "the servant is not greater than his lord" (John 13:16). If the servant were greater than his lord, he might refuse obedience. But *lordship demands obedience*.

4. Finally, the act should be perpetuated, for our Lord said: "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13:17). It should be made clear that happiness comes not from merely *knowing* these things, but from *doing* them. Again this speaks for itself. Those who have not obeyed these words have little right to pass judgment. Those who have obeyed the Lord in these things have found the joy of obedience.

Practical Results

This ordinance keeps ever before our minds the willingness of our Lord, who is now in the glory as our Intercessor, our Advocate, even the propitiation for our sins. That He can and will cleanse us from all sin causes confidence and rejoicing in the heart of the weakest saint when by faith he obeys the words of the Lord in this wonderful passage.

This ordinance reveals that as long as one walks through this life he will need to be cleansed. It therefore keeps the minds of believers on the blood of Christ. Believers will have the old nature eradicated at the resurrection, but now we need a Saviour who is able to keep us clean. In conclusion, the strongest statement which can be written on this subject is John 13:13-17.

"And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46).